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EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE PROGRAMME OF THE UNITED NATIONS
HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

Forty-third session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 478th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Thursday, 8 October 1992, at 10 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. J.A. LANUS (Argentina)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.20 a.m.

REVIEW OF UNHCR PROGRAMMES FINANCED BY VOLUNTARY FUNDS IN 1991-1992; ADOPTION OF THE 1993 GENERAL PROGRAMMES AND BUDGET

STATUS OF CONTRIBUTIONS AND OVERALL FINANCIAL REQUIREMENTS FOR 1992 AND 1993

ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT

(agenda item 5) (A/AC.96/793, Parts I to II, A/AC.96/798, A/AC.96/795, A/AC.96/SC.2/CRP.18 and Add.1, A/AC.96/786, A/AC.96/787 and Corr.1 and Add.1 and A/AC.96/803)

Introductory remarks of the Deputy High Commissioner

1. Mr. STAFFORD (Deputy High Commissioner) said that agenda item 5 gave the Executive Committee an opportunity to consider, as a whole, the programme and funding of UNHCR. The report of the Sub-committee on Administrative and Financial Matters (A/AC.96/803) illustrated the quality of the guidelines with which it had provided the Executive Committee concerning finance, administration and human resources.

2. The major item before the Executive Committee at its present session concerned the approval of the 1993 General Programmes target amounting to $378,249,000. Some delegations had wondered whether the proposed target was realistic. Others had raised questions about the right mix of general and special programmes. A proposal had also been made to increase the Programme Reserve and other contingency mechanisms, and the Sub-Committee might wish to address those questions at its inter-sessional meetings.

3. In his statement to the Sub-Committee, he had said that UNHCR was determined to be a responsible steward of the resources placed at its disposal. That implied ensuring that financial procedures and controls were in place and were respected by staff and Governments. However, those efforts to strengthen financial accountability must be matched by improvements in programme delivery. The Executive Committee's work and decisions in that connection were encouraging.

4. Furthermore, the guidelines adopted by the Executive Committee for refugee women and children would certainly be reflected adequately in UNHCR programmes. With respect to its human resources policy, UNHCR must, as the High Commissioner had said, put into place a human resources strategy that reflected not only the needs of refugees but also those of a dedicated staff.

5. Lastly, he expressed sincere thanks to donors for their exceptional support and confidence. He also thanked countries which had hosted large numbers of refugees and also expressed gratitude to the implementing partners, especially the non-governmental organizations and other United Nations bodies, for their contributions.

Adoption of the report of the Sub-Committee on Administrative and Financial Matters (A/AC.96/803)

6. The CHAIRMAN said that, if he heard no objections, he would consider that the report of the Sub-Committee on Administrative and Financial Matters was adopted.

It was so decided.

Review of UNHCR programmes financed by voluntary funds in 1991-1992; adoption of the 1993 General Programmes and budget (A/AC.96/793, Parts I to VI)

7. The CHAIRMAN invited delegations to present their general observations on the agenda item.

8. Mr. LARSEN (Denmark) noted that, since present circumstances and the international community had dictated a greatly expanded level of activity, it should not be surprising that UNHCR had passed the "one billion dollar mark".

9. The Executive Committee had rightly devoted much attention to the problems of mass movements of people and their consequences. Since they raised the question of emergencies, it was reassuring to see that the intentions outlined in the Executive Committee the previous year had become operational realities. However, more work on capacity-building was necessary and there was a need to improve UNHCR's own ability to mobilize and release internal resources for emergency operations, notwithstanding the constraints of the present staffing situation. On the question of repatriation, reintegration and development, the international community must endeavour to achieve greater coherence between international humanitarian aid mechanisms and international development machinery. Regardless at what level international intervention took place, namely that of UNHCR, an important aim should be to integrate humanitarian action with efforts to resolve the underlying causes of crises and to build bridges between relief, rehabilitation and, ultimately, development. If that was to be achieved, the various agents must adopt a positive attitude and act in a spirit of partnership in the context of a division of labour, both within the United Nations system as well as at the level of assisted countries and donor countries. He agreed with the High Commissioner about the importance of applying the lead agency concept to operational coordination in complex emergencies such as those in the former Yugoslavia and Somalia.

10. It went without saying that the burden of financing should be borne equitably and that many wealthy countries could and should contribute more so that UNHCR could accomplish the tasks entrusted to it by the international community. In that connection he announced that Denmark expected in the very near future to be able to contribute a further DKr 56 million, equivalent to over US$ 10 million, to programmes for Mozambican, Somali and Afghan refugees as well as to programmes in the former Yugoslavia. That additional amount would bring the planned Danish 1992 contribution to over US$ 36 million.

11. Referring to the level of General Programmes financing, he regretted that the Executive Committee had been unable at its present session to reach agreement on an upwards adjustment to US$ 408 million for the 1993 General Programmes.

12. Mr. MACRIS (Cyprus) said that Cyprus had been the first country after the Second World War to suffer from the devastating consequences of ethnic cleansing, since a much stronger neighbour had imposed that practice on the Cypriot people. The UNHCR programme in Cyprus, which continued to be fully financed by the United States, had been outlined in the relevant report prepared by UNHCR. However, his Government remained convinced that the natural and more desirable solution to the refugee problem was repatriation under conditions of safety. The specific problem of displaced persons in Cyprus called for the application of United Nations resolutions and of the principles embodied in human rights instruments. However, as stated by the Secretary-General in his report of 21 August 1992 to the Security Council, the conditions and exceptions put forward by the other side in order to implement those principles were equivalent to denying the displaced persons the right to return home and the right to property.

13. His Government had spared no effort in its quest for a just and viable solution to the Cyprus problem. It was to be hoped that the Turkish side would finally decide to participate in the next round of negotiations to begin in New York on 26 October 1992 and that it would at last take the political decision to contribute to an equitable and final solution to the problem.

14. Mr. SAENS CARRETE (Observer for Mexico), referring to part IV of document A/AC.96/793, said he wished to make a number of observations concerning the situation in Mexico.

15. It would be well if future reports of that kind described the indirect contribution made by asylum countries to refugee activities, since what they were doing was not always easy to quantify. That was true, for example, of their efforts on behalf of displaced populations in respect of health, education and natural resources.

16. He also pointed out that the figures communicated by Mexico to the International Conference on Central American Refugees (CIREFCA) in 1989 were not necessarily official, contrary to what was stated in paragraph 4.5.5 of the report.

17. Moreover, a number of UNHCR Headquarters' experts had, in 1992, visited the country to study the water requirements of refugee establishments. It would be well if the conclusions reached in their report, namely, those concerning the reorganization of water supply systems, could include an estimate of the cost of such reorganization should it have budgetary implications.

18. He noted that, according to paragraph 4.5.6 of the report, "retroactive registration [of births] in Chiapas ... will require the allocation of additional resources by the civil registry authorities". That wording might

suggest that the procedure was being held up, whereas registration was going ahead in step with the compilation of data, which depended to a great extent on the cooperation of the refugee population.

19. Commenting on what was said in paragraph 4.5.18 of the report, he said that reference could have been made to the projects being carried out to improve health programmes and school infrastructure. The relevant budgets had been reduced considerably in comparison with 1991, but the cuts had been necessary.

20. He welcomed the close cooperation established between UNHCR and the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR) of which he was the General Coordinator.

21. Mr. BENHIMA (Morocco) said it was gratifying that the improvement of UNHCR's financial situation had had the effect of restoring balance and absorbing previous deficits, despite an increase in requirements due to larger numbers of refugees. That was clear from the budgetary estimates for the 1993 General Programmes, which had remained at the 1992 level. His delegation considered that the expansion of various programme elements was an approach that should be supported; indeed, the increase in allocations under the Emergency Fund, in the General Allocation for Voluntary Repatriation and in the Programme Reserve constituted effective means of tackling unforeseen developments.

22. Unfortunately the African continent, which had suffered so many tragedies, was allocated a comparatively modest amount for the next financial year. It was desirable that UNHCR, in view of its key role in humanitarian relief operations, should continue to show unflagging interest in that continent in the context of inter-institutional cooperation, and in particular cooperation with the Department of Humanitarian Affairs. For example, the assignment of qualified field staff should be encouraged, and more equitable geographical distribution based on competence, motivation and integrity was also desirable.

23. The improvement of UNHCR's programme evaluation systems and procedures ensured that its activities were effective and worthwhile. In that connection, he referred to Part VI of document A/AC.96/793 and specifically the paragraph devoted to refugees called "Sahraouis". The figure of 165,000 mentioned was unacceptable since it was exaggerated, as had been emphasized on many occasions. According to the very generous estimates of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara, their number, including children, was not over 65,000. Moreover, the figure of 165,000 had never been confirmed by UNHCR. He also noted that information received from former senior officials of Polisario alleged misappropriation of humanitarian assistance; regardless whether it was provided by UNHCR, Governments or NGOs, a large proportion of that assistance ended up as contraband and enriched the leaders of Polisario. Donors should monitor the use and destination of their assistance as a matter of urgency.

24. Mr. LACROIX (Belgium) said that the tragic events taking place in the former Yugoslavia and in Somalia revealed how important it was that the international community should be able to count on an organization such as

UNHCR. In 1992 Belgium would make a contribution of BF 14 million to ad hoc programmes, some of which were yet to be drawn up, and intended to earmark the same amount under the 1993 budget.

25. As regards the former Yugoslavia, Belgium had taken certain initiatives likely to assist UNHCR in its quest for short-term solutions to the problem of assisting the most disadvantaged. For example, it was participating in the establishment of an airlift between Zagreb and Sarajevo under UNHCR auspices and had contributed to the purchase and transport of the medical and food aid being supplied by UNHCR. It had also decided to contribute to the establishment of a winter camp for refugees in Croatia in the amount of BF 60 million. Other activities included the provisional acceptance of Croat children in Belgium and the granting of special temporary status to those who, fleeing the combat zones, had sought refuge in Belgium.

26. Mr. JURY (United States of America) said that his delegation had already, in the Sub-Committee on Administrative and Financial Matters, welcomed the statements of the High Commissioner and Deputy High Commissioner concerning the improvement of programming, particularly on behalf of women and children; it was understood that that work would be continued at the Sub-Committee's inter-sessional meetings. On the other hand, his delegation, like that of Denmark, regretted that the General Programmes budget would not be increased at the present session. The present budget was inadequate to meet 1993 requirements, particularly in Africa. The United States, which was the largest donor, considered that an increase in that level of financing would make the General Programmes more flexible and enable their requirements and objectives to be met to a greater extent. He therefore endorsed the Danish representative's observations as well as those of the Swedish representative, and hoped that the question would be taken up once again in the Sub-Committee on Administrative and Financial Matters with a view to the speedy adoption of a decision.

27. Mr. SEMICHI (Algeria), replying to the Moroccan representative who had challenged the figure of 165,000 Sahraoui refugees in Algerian territory, said that it was an estimate arrived at by the Algerian authorities; UNHCR assisted only 85,000 of that number. Discussion of the figure of 165,000 refugees was not really the concern of UNHCR which, it was to be hoped, could maintain its present level of assistance pending the adoption of political solutions as rapidly as possible.

28. Mrs. LUND (Norway) endorsed the views of the Danish delegation concerning the financing of the 1993 General Programmes. She hoped that the matter would be discussed at the first inter-sessional meeting of the Sub-Committee on Administrative and Financial Matters.

29. Mrs. BERGSTROM (Finland) said that, like the Danish, United States and Norwegian delegations, her own delegation regretted that the General Programmes budget had not been increased.

30. Mr. PINELL (Nicaragua) said that the draft resolution concerning the International Conference on Central American Refugees (CIREFCA) would be discussed by the Friends of the Rapporteur that afternoon; amendments had been proposed to the text.

31. Mr. BENHIMA (Morocco), replying to the Algerian representative's comments, said that, just as the Government of that country was entitled to its own ideas about the number of Sahraoui refugees, he, as representative of the Moroccan Government, had the right to a different opinion. Perhaps there really were 165,000 refugees at Tindouf, but they were not all Sahraouis. As for the misappropriation of assistance for Sahraouis refugees, he was not implicating the Algerian Government but rather the leaders of Polisario who seized a large proportion of the assistance provided by Governments, international organizations and NGOs.

32. Mrs. RUESTA DE FURTER (Venezuela) welcomed the statements of the High Commissioner and his Deputy concerning refugee women and children. Her delegation had already explained its position on the report of the Sub-Committee on Administrative and Financial Matters in the Sub-Committee itself. She was also gratified by the efforts being made by UNHCR to train its personnel.

33. Mr. NORDBY (International Council of Voluntary Agencies) said that the NGOs should be invited to cooperate with UNHCR in identifying the needs of priority groups, namely, refugee children, refugee women, persons facing acute risks to their life or safety, and physically or mentally disabled persons.

34. The International Council welcomed the appointment of the Senior Coordinator for Refugee Children - an idea that had been defended at several previous sessions of the Executive Committee - and considered that donor countries should undertake to provide the means necessary to realize the goals that the Coordinator would set. Priority areas for refugee children included the provision of education early on in emergency situations, the improvement of the quality of health care and psycho-social initiatives aimed at alleviating the effects of war. Efforts must also be made to ensure wide implementation of UNHCR's guidelines on refugee children. The Executive Committee should, at the present session, make recommendations on how UNHCR could facilitate the national and international implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and he hoped that UNHCR would follow closely the deliberations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

35. Steps should also be taken to maximize the implementation of the Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women. The International Council called, in particular, on the Executive Committee to make funds available to carry out the training programmes for UNHCR's own staff. Moreover, the Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women should be updated to address the particular needs of returnee women and internally displaced women, with whom UNHCR was increasingly becoming involved. UNHCR should also try to increase the protection of women among its own staff, and particularly of women medical staff in the field. Similarly, UNHCR should be encouraged to promote refugee womens' rights in training programmes and ensure that strategies for community mobilization involving women were incorporated in emergency planning.

36. It was gratifying to note that UNHCR was paying greater attention to the role of public information. The new information strategy outlined in the Information Note was an important step and information-sharing with the non-governmental organizations was vital. Unfortunately, the question of liaison with the NGOs was discussed only in a brief and incomplete manner in that

Note. An information structure for operational NGOs should also be envisaged with support from the NGO Liaison Unit, which could ensure that a public information officer was part of any humanitarian emergency operation team set up by UNHCR.

37. A problem common to UNHCR and the NGOs was that the latter often failed to coordinate their activities effectively in the field. It would be desirable for UNHCR to include an NGO coordinator in the field teams of all humanitarian crisis operations.

38. The International Council proposed, with a view to the coordination of humanitarian activities, that the United Nations Secretary-General, through the DHA-UNDRO Office, should take the lead in setting up coordination structures for humanitarian response to all major humanitarian emergency crises. Those coordination structures should include recommendations on a division of labour between all parts of the United Nations system, the country of origin, donors and NGOs. NGOs or groups of NGOs should explicitly define their own roles in relation to the mandates of the United Nations lead agency, designated for every geographical or otherwise defined area of relief efforts, the role of UNHCR and that of ICRC being specifically defined in accordance with their respective mandates. Lastly, the NGOs should form coordinating mechanisms with all local and international NGOs.

39. The International Council welcomed the revision of UNHCR's internal guidelines for educational assistance to refugees. Education and training provided an activity that could be used to promote self-help activities, allow refugees to maintain some self-esteem and directly contribute to successful durable solutions.

40. Mr. AL-KADHI (Observer for Iraq), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, noted that, according to the representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran, there were over 980,000 Iraqi refugees in Iranian territory. He rejected that figure which, in his view, was a complete exaggeration. Moreover, the delegation of the Islamic Republic of Iran had not indicated its sources. Thousands of Iraqi Kurds might well have fled to the Islamic Republic of Iran and Turkey at the time of the Gulf War, but it was a fact that they had all returned to Iraq, as indeed had been confirmed by UNHCR.

41. Mr. JAHROMY (Islamic Republic of Iran), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, pointed out that the figure in question included above all Iraqi refugees who had crossed the frontier during the 1980s. He added that the Iranian authorities had on several occasions invited UNHCR to visit those persons who were in the provinces of Bakhtaran, Khuzestan, Kurdistan and western Azerbaijan.

42. Mr. AL-KADHI (Observer for Iraq), speaking once again in exercise of the right of reply, rejected the affirmation that Iraqis had taken refuge in the Islamic Republic of Iran when the two countries had been at war. On the other hand, when that conflict had broken out the Iraqi Government had been obliged to send back to their country of origin thousands of Iranians who had established their legal domicile in Iraq. Did the Iranian authorities regard those persons, who possessed Iranian nationality, as refugees?

43. Mr. ISHAK (Chairman of the UNHCR Staff Council) drew the Executive Committee's attention to the report on issues of interest to the staff that the Staff Council had submitted on 2 October to the Sub-Committee on Administrative and Financial Matters (E/SC.2/57). It was the Staff Council's duty to make known the views of the staff on the way they were managed and on other aspects of their conditions of service; in that connection the Staff Council had emphasized the importance of maintaining an ongoing process of consultations with the staff and had highlighted the fact that agreements had been reached on most human resources management issues; it had also stressed the need for timeliness in the implementation of those agreements as well as the need for transparency and evenness in the application of all other administrative and personnel policies.

44. It could not be overemphasized that UNHCR staff had the same goals as the Executive Committee, that they were proud of serving the Office of the High Commissioner and that they were jealous about its reputation. The staff wanted to make its contribution to efforts aimed at enhancing UNHCR's ability to fulfil its humanitarian mandate. At the same time they realized that quality, efficiency and emergency-preparedness were increasingly becoming the criteria by which the performance and competence of UNHCR were being judged. However, there were a number of major issues that were of great importance to UNHCR's efficiency; he wished to discuss two of them which were interrelated, namely, staff morale and organizational performance.

45. It was disturbing to note that staff morale was low while UNHCR was showing renewed dynamism, the international community was displaying renewed confidence in it and donor countries were supporting it so energetically. The reasons for low staff morale could be easily identified. For example, when certain groups or individuals seemed to be privileged and particularly favoured, it was inevitable that the vast majority of the rest of the hard-working staff should feel that they were being discriminated against. Above all, a working environment that offered equal training and career opportunities to all staff members, regardless of sex, nationality or grade, was essential. Promises of change and improvement were not enough. The staff needed tangible proof and that was why there was a need for prompt action to implement the agreements reached between the staff and the administration with regard to human resources management issues, including the guidelines on the improvement of the status of women in UNHCR.

46. As for organizational performance, he noted that the significant changes that had occurred in the world required the United Nations system to improve its performance by making internal adjustments, reducing bureaucracy and above all emphasizing efficiency. UNHCR had undeniably made efforts along those lines during the past few years by, for example, gradually adjusting management and administrative practices and investments in upgrading computerized and communication systems, improving the quality of documentation, fine-tuning programme and financial systems, and achieving greater public awareness of UNHCR activities. But had it really tackled the key issues and could it thereby really improve the services offered to refugees?

47. UNHCR had clearly invested much less in the task of upgrading its human resources than in that of modernizing its equipment. Yet the upgrading of human resources called for long-term investment, and it was obvious that UNHCR should improve the planning of those resources and offer its staff equitable career possibilities. Improvement of the conditions of service of the 3,000 UNHCR staff members, both women and men, at headquarters as well as in the field, was the key factor in improving organizational performance and could have a real impact on the quality of the services provided to refugees.

48. It was high time to take the necessary steps to adjust human resources management strategies because failure to do so would mean that UNHCR would never be able to react effectively in the emergency situations that occured on an unprecedented scale in today's world. The staff and administration had reached agreements on the needed directions for organizational improvement and they had been elaborated upon in numerous studies. What remained to be done was to initiate a strategic planning process that would bring about their implementation.

49. All those concerned should cooperate in making UNHCR a body that genuinely valued its human resources, particularly at a time when the contribution of each and every staff member was vital. The staff had spared no effort and was committed to supporting the efforts that would be made in meeting the difficult challenges of the post-cold war era.

50. Lastly, he drew the Committee's attention to the fate of his colleagues who had lost their lives in the performance of their functions on behalf of refugees.

51. On the proposal of the Chairman, the members of the Committee observed a minute of silence in tribute to the memory of members of the staff of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees who had lost their lives in the line of duty.

52. Mr. STAFFORD (Deputy United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), referring to the suggestions and observations made by various speakers, assured the representative of Mexico that the UNHCR secretariat would endeavour to collect the necessary data concerning the indirect contributions made by asylum countries to activities on behalf of refugees and would report its findings. It would not, however, be easy to determine how that contribution could be used as an element in making comparisons and evaluations.

53. The Danish delegation, among others, had referred to and supported the increase in the indicative planning figure for General Programmes. It should be borne in mind that preparation of the documents under consideration had began in April for the annual session that took place in Autumn, and that the new amounts indicated corresponded to requirements identified at the time. It was admittedly difficult to understand how the programme budget of a body could increase from $550 million to $1 billion in the space of a year but it was no easier to engage in strategic crisis management planning. In any

event, the UNHCR secretariat was prepared to reply to any question that might be raised by delegations at subsequent meetings of the Sub-Committee on Administrative and Financial Matters or at any extraordinary meeting that might have to be convened for that purpose.

54. He had listened with keen interest to the observations of the representative of the International Council of Voluntary Agencies. His points concerning the coordination of humanitarian assistance raised the question of the division and the succession of the responsibilities shouldered by the various partners, namely, the Department of Humanitarian Affairs, countries of origin, asylum countries, UNHCR and the NGOS - a question that Governments should consider and settle in the framework of the reforms being carried out in the United Nations system.

55. He had taken good note of the observations of the representatives of Morocco and Algeria who had raised the question of political solutions. One idea to which all delegations present at the Executive Committee's forty-third session could subscribe was that it was absolutely necessary to find a political solution to continuing refugee problems.

56. He agreed that the reduction and assignment of staff, the increasing number of emergency situations and UNHCR's difficulties had not been easy for UNHCR staff to accept, and that they continued to pose problems. He endorsed the observations of the Chairman of the Staff Council, except as regards staff morale which he found excellent in general, both at headquarters as well as in the field, and he took the opportunity to thank the entire staff of UNHCR for its devotion.

57. Mr. WALZER (UNHCR Secretariat) said that the deliberations of the Sub-Committee on Administrative and Financial Matters had, throughout 1990, been a great source of encouragement for himself as well as for his colleagues. He was a firm believer in the virtues of dialogue with Governments and was prepared, at the Sub-Committee's meetings, to go into greater detail on the points raised during the discussions at the forty-third session.

58. The CHAIRMAN submitted to the Executive Committee for approval the country/area General Programmes target as well as the 1993 General Programmes global estimates amounting to US$ 378,249,000, including $20 million for the Emergency Fund, as indicated in Parts I to VI of document A/AC.96/793. In the absence of any objections, he would consider that the Executive Committee approved those amounts.

59. It was so decided.

60. The CHAIRMAN said that the other points concerning administrative and financial questions would be examined when the Executive Committee adopted its report on the work of its forty-third session. He noted that the Executive Committee had completed its consideration of agenda item 5.

The meeting rose at 12.05 p.m.